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ABSTRACT

It is argued that assessment of student writing can be enhanced by adoption of a functional approach to linguistic analysis; through their research, functional grammarians have provided language teachers with criteria for evaluating the extent to which learners have gained control of the grammatical and discourse features of a variety of communication genres valued in academic contexts, and these can be used systematically to evaluate student written production. Two innovative Australian programs in which this principle has been applied are described. One is a large-scale curriculum development effort focusing on development of elementary student writing skills, and the other is a project to develop a systematic procedure for diagnosing and quantifying the strengths and weaknesses of students' academic language, both oral and written. Contains eight references. (MSE)

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USING A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH IN ASSESSING WRITTEN TEXTS

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USING A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH IN ASSESSING WRITTEN TEXTS

David Nunan

Introduction

This paper presents a case for the use of a functional approach to the analysis and assessment of written language in schools. A key concept in the analytical scheme described in the paper is that of 'genre'. "The term 'genre' has been used for many years to refer to different styles of literary discourse ... and highlights the fact that different types of discourse can be identified by their overall 'shape' or 'generic structure'. In recent times, the term has been adapted by functional linguists to refer to different types of communicative events." (Nunan 1993) It is this more recent adoption which is taken up in this paper.

In the paper I shall provide a brief outline of a functional linguistic model. I shall then describe two curriculum projects with which I have been involved. The first, an evaluation of the Disadvantaged Schools Writing Project, was carried out in Sydney. The second, the South Australian Needs Assessment Project (SNAP), took place in Adelaide. Despite their different orientations, both projects shared a common ideological base in that they were both based on a functional view of language derived from systemic-functional linguistics. The paper concludes with a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of using a functional approach to the assessment of written language.

Functional Linguistic Models and the Notion of 'Genre'

Functional models of linguistic analysis are developed to account for relationships between the forms of the language, and the various uses to which the language is put. The systematic relationship between language structure and function is described by Halliday (1985) in the following way:

> Every text - that is, everything that is said or written - unfolds in some context of use; furthermore, it is the uses of language that, over tens of thousands of generations, have shaped the system. Language has evolved to satisfy human needs; and the way it is organised is functional with respect to those needs - it is not arbitrary. A functional grammar is essentially a 'natural' grammar, in the sense that everything in it can be explained, ultimately, by reference to how language is used.

A key concept for many working within this functional perspective is 'genre'. A 'Genre' is a particular type of oral or written communication such as a narrative, a casual conversation, a poem, a recipe or a description. Different genres are

typified by a particular structure and by grammatical forms that reflect the communicative purpose of the genre in questions.

The 'genre' theorists, then, argue that language exists to fulfil certain functions, and that these functions will determine, not only the grammatical items which appear in a text, but also the overall shape or structure of the discourse which emerges as people communicate with one another. In other words, it will have certain predictable stages. The communicative purpose will also be reflected in the basic building blocks of the discourse, that is, the words and grammatical structures themselves. In other words, different types of communicative events result in different types of discourse, and these will have their own distinctive characteristics. Some events result in sermons, others in political speeches, and yet others in casual conversations. While each sermon, political speech and casual conversation will be different, each discourse type will share certain characteristics which will set it apart from other discourse types.

I should like to illustrate this with reference to two authentic texts, one spoken and one written. (The examples are taken from Nunan 1993:50-51)

1. Written text:

   Hanging bungle uncovered
   By Geoff Easdown, Mike Edmonds and Barry MacFadyn

   MELBOURNE: A sensational development in the case of Ronald Ryan, the last man hanged in Australia, shows a bungle almost certainly cost him his life.

   It was revealed last night that four letters written by jurors in the trial, appealing for Ryan not to be hanged, were never sent to the Victorian Cabinet which decided to execute him.

   And a member of the Victorian Cabinet that voted 11-4 to hang Ryan, Sir Rupert Hamer, says the mercy pleas by four jury members could have saved Ryan. (The Advertiser January 6, 1992)

2. Spoken text

   A: What did you do last night?

   B: Well, Mum and Dad went out so we went to Marg's to sleep, and Sarah wouldn't go to sleep, and she wanted to ring Mum, and Marg said she couldn't, and so she cried, and so Marg combed her hair, and then she went to sleep. She was really naughty ....

   A: What time did she go to sleep?

   B: mmm - 'bout one o'clock. (Author's data)

The written text is an extract from a leading article in a newspaper. Its generic structure (at least the structure of the extract) is as follows:

Title
Author (s)
Location
Argument
Supporting detail
Supporting detail

Linguistically, the piece contains an agentless passive 'It was revealed ...' It also contains emotively charged words such as 'sensation', 'bungle', 'mercy', 'plea'. In terms of its layout and physical appearance, the text contains a large, eye-catching headline. The columns and assignment of each sentence to a separate paragraph are designed to make the piece easy to read.

The spoken extract is taken from a conversation between a girl and her grandmother, and contains a recount. According to functional linguists, recounts consist of a sequence of events which are initiated by an introduction and orientation, and which end with a comment and conclusion. We can see that, with the exception of a conclusion, this recount conforms to the proposed generic structure. Grammatically, recounts are characterised by the simple past tense, and the use of specific reference to people and places. We can see that this recount, in addition to its generic structure, also contains the grammatical items of simple past tense and specific reference.

Introduction:	Well, Mum and Dad went out
Orientation:	so we went to Marg's to sleep,
Event:	and Sarah wouldn't go to sleep,
Event:	and she wanted to ring Mum,
Event:	and Marg said she couldn't,
Event:	and so she cried,
Event:	and so Marg combed her hair,
Event:	and then she went to sleep.
Comment:	She was really naughty.

At present, linguists are studying different text and discourse types in an effort to identify their underlying generic structure, and the linguistic elements which characterise them. In addition to identifying generic structure, and linguistic features, genre analysts also look at other discourse features such as topicalisation, the use of reference, and the operation of given/new structures in text.

What are some of the practical applications of this model? In the next two sections, I shall outline two recent curriculum innovations which have employed the analytical tools offered by genre theory and functional grammar.

Case Study 1: An Evaluation of the Disadvantaged Schools Project Writing Package

The first case I wish to cite is an evaluation of an innovative curriculum program focusing on the development of written language in primary and secondary schools (although we shall only look at the primary school data here.) I was commissioned, along with three colleagues at the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, Macquarrie University, to evaluate this innovation. (For a detailed description of the project, see Nunan 1992.)

The innovation had six objectives, as follows:

1. That students demonstrate improvements in their ability to respond effectively to the writing demands of the curriculum. Specifically, they will be able to perform effectively in written class assignments, make effective notes, do independent research, complete written homework assignments, participate fully in classroom discussions about writing.

2. That students understand the criteria by which their writing is being assessed and act on their writing to meet these criteria.

3. That there is evidence to demonstrate the positive impact of the teaching/learning cycle, known as the 'curriculum genre', on students' verbal and reading abilities.

4 That teachers participating in the genre writing package be able to identify examples of the following genres: recount, report, procedure, explanation, exposition, discussion and narrative.

5. That teachers will be aware of the significant language features of the genres listed above.

6. That teachers will be able to apply their knowledge of genre theory to identify the schematic structures and significant language features of genres other than those identified above.

The evaluation had three overall purposes:

1. To assess the impact of the 'package' on children's writing.

2. To evaluate the impact of the package on teachers'
   a) capability to assess the effectiveness of students' writing
   b) pedagogy
   c) knowledge of the social functions of language

3. To identify which elements of the package have been most beneficial and which require amendment.

While the evaluation focused on the impact of the package on the practices of the teachers, as well as on the children's writing, I shall confine myself here to the learners who took part in the project.

Data collection methods:

1. A detailed questionnaire completed by teachers involved in the project;

2. Focussed interviews with teachers and other key personnel;

3. Observation and analysis of lessons;

4. Analysis of samples of students' writing from schools taking part in the innovation and also from a sample of the schools not involved in the innovation.

Timeline:

MAY: Appoint principal researcher. Devise questionnaire and distribute to schools

JUNE: Interview consultants and authors of inservice package on goals, nature and implementation of package. Conduct literature review. Identify 'non'-package schools to act as control. Collect samples of students' writing from package and non-package schools.

JULY: Collate responses to questionnaire and select schools for further evaluation. Structured interviews with teachers, students and parents. Recording of sample lessons and collection of written texts relating to these lessons

AUG: Complete interviews, recordings of sample lessons and collection of texts. Begin data analysis and evaluation of students' writing

SEPT: Complete data analysis and evaluation of students' writing. Begin drafting report.

OCT: Submit draft report.

NOV: Revise report. Submission of final draft.

When the data were in, we discovered that we had around 1,500 pieces of children's writing from the package schools, and a number of comparison schools. We had two weeks in which to analyse and evaluate the samples. The first task was to develop assessment criteria based on the linguistic model underlying the innovation. A complete analysis was impossible, so we confined ourselves to three

characteristic features: schematic structure, topic development, and reference. These are described below.

Assessment criteria:

1. Schematic structure: Is the schematic structure appropriate for the genre of the text? (In the model, it is argued that texts written for different purposes will exhibit different patterns of overall organisation and text structure.)

2. Topic development: Does the writer explicitly identify the topic, and was the topic developed appropriately? (If the writer fails to develop the text topic or switches from one topic to another, then the text is confusing and difficult to follow.)

3 Reference: Does the writer use reference appropriately? (Appropriate use of reference is an indicator of text cohesion and an indicator that the writer has a sense of the 'decontextualised' nature of writing in comparison to speaking.) (Nunan, 1992:204)

Schematic structure of successful text:

Structure	Clauses	Text: The Skull and the Skeleton
Orientation	1	One day there was a poor orphan girl
	2	She had to work with her stepmother
	3	Her hands were going to skin and bones
	4	So she decided to run away
	5	She saw a castle
	6	So she knocked on the door tap tap tap
	7	A skull with no body opened the door
	8	and he said "yes"
Complication	9	The girl told the skull [what had happened to her]
	10	She stepped into his castle
	11	She saw a body without a skull
	12	She knew that it belonged to the skull
	13	And the skull told the girl [what had happened]
	14	The (sic) they had dinner
	15	She stayed two night [sic]
Resolution	16	and she kissed the skull
	17	They got married
	18	They lived happily after

Commentary on text:

[This text] like many other narratives collected for this analysis contains no evaluation and reveals that this young writer, like many others, lacks full control of the narrative genre. However, for the purpose of this evaluation of young children's writing the essential stages of the narrative have been taken to be orientation, complication and resolution, and hence is assessed as satisfying criterion 1. The topic of [the text] is developed in the sense that the adventures of the 'poor orphan girl' are related to the meeting of the 'skull' and subsequent finding of its disengaged body. While the logical sequence of some events in the Narrative such as the skull telling 'what had happened' and 'having dinner' are not especially clear, there is enough information about the skull and skeleton for the reader to follow both the sequencing of events and the connection between complication and resolution. Hence the text is considered successful in terms of criterion 2. Reference is used appropriately in the text. The major participants are explicitly introduced: 'a poor orphan girl', 'a skull with no body' and thereafter referred to appropriately; 'she', 'the girl', 'he', 'the skull'. Thus it is clear at all times who or what is being referred to in the text. (Walshe et al. 1990:20)

Schematic structure of unsuccessful text:

Structure	**Clauses**	**Text: Aboriginal Skeletons and Skulls**
Thesis (statement)	1	All around the world the museums do need some skeletons and skulls
Argument 1 (statement)	2	Well the Aboriginals gave them some of their grandparents to put in the museum's (sic)
Argument 2 (recount)	3 4	Well Loir Richards is an Aboriginal and she said that some people say that Aboriginals have not got any feelings
Conclusion	5 6	The skeletons and skulls should go back where they come from and remain
Argument 3	7 8	You would not like it if they took your grandparents skeletons and skulls.

Commentary on text:

... the structure of Text 2 can be summarised as follows; a general statement, which could be generously interpreted as a thesis, following by a second statement, rather than an argument. Next is a short recount rather than a second argument. ... followed by the writer's conclusion regarding this topic and then there is a follow up argument. It is the conclusion that gives the clearest indication that the writer intended the text to be an Exposition. Other stages in the text are not those of a successful Exposition. ... Development of topic in Test 2 is unsatisfactory. While the text is loosely cohesive around the topic of museums and skulls and skeletons,

there are problems in that none of the arguments follow logically from one another. ... There are also minor problems with referencing. The opening statement refers to 'the museums'. Such reference is unclear as the reader is not informed which museums are being referred to. ... Thus Text 2 is assessed as unsatisfactory on all three criteria. (Walshe et al. 1990:21)

Outcomes:

1. The innovation had an overall positive response from participating teachers, teachers giving an overwhelmingly positive response to the Package;

2. The innovation had a beneficial impact on students' writing. A comparative analysis of texts from Package and non-Package schools indicated that, in terms of the evaluative criteria identified by the researchers, students in Package schools produced a greater range of factual texts, and produced them more successfully;

3. Teachers' classroom practices changed as a result of participation in the innovation. While teachers incorporated ideas from the package into their teaching, they adapted these significantly to suit their needs;

4. The objectives of the innovation were largely met;

5. The model of inservice upon which the innovation is based has a number of distinctive features which contributed to its effectiveness. These included the balance of theory and practice, the demonstration lessons, and the cyclical nature of the input. (Nunan, 1992:207-208)

Case Study 2: South Australian Needs Assessment Procedures Project (SNAP)

The South Australian Needs Assessment Procedures project was initiated to develop a systematic procedure for diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of students in their control over the spoken and written genres which they would need in order to succeed in school. The project also took on the extremely ambitious task of attempting to develop a procedure for quantifying qualitative information. My role in this project, over a two year period, was as consultant and adviser to the team and the principal researcher, Lexie Mincham.

I have included examples of two different genres, an explanation and a recount to illustrate the way in which the functional language model underlying the project has been used to provide a set of explicit criteria for evaluating students' writing. It is not difficult to see how the pro formas could also be used for instructional purposes. One of the key principles behind learner-centred instruction is that teachers be explicit about what learners are supposed to do and why, and so, in a learner-centred classroom, these pro formas could be extremely useful in helping

the students see what they need to do in order to produce acceptable texts of various kinds.

Example 1

Written Language Assessment Activity : Years 8 - 10 **Explanation**				
An explanation is a factual text used to explain the processes involved in the evaluation of natural and social phenomena, or how something works. Explanations are used to account for why things are as they are, focusing on causal relations. In the school curriculum, explanations are often found in Science and Social Studies.				
Name of Student Name of School Topic of explanation	Year Level/Class Date Teacher			
Criteria (Tick appropriate box.)	Very Competent	Competent	Limited Competence	Not Competent Yet
Ability to carry out the task *Did the student* - write an explanation with minimal support ***Structure and organisation*** - introduce the issue/make a general statement - use logical, sequenced explanation of how/why something occurs - use paragraphs ***Language features*** - use appropriate subject vocabulary - use appropriate tenses - use passive voice (optional) - use relevant linking words, e.g. if, when, because, consequently, since - express relationships between concepts, particularly time and cause/effect relationships - use nominalised processes - develop themes logically and consistent with explanation - use language to maintain appropriate tenor - support text with diagram (optional) ***Accuracy*** - use grammar accurately e.g. word order, verb endings, pronouns - spell and use punctuation accurately				
General comments				
Global rating (circle)	Lowest 1 2 3 4 5 Highest			

Example 2

Written Language Assessment Activity : Years 8 - 10 Recount				
A recount relates a series of events. The focus of a recount is on events rather than on character development and plot as in narrative. Recounts can be personal (retelling events in which the writer has been personally involved e.g. an excursion), factual (recording details of an incident/event e.g. news report or historical account), or imaginative (retelling events from an imaginary point of view (e.g. "A day in the life of a Roman slave" or "How radium was discovered.)				
Name of Student Name of School Topic of explanation	Year Level/Class Date Teacher			
Criteria (Tick appropriate box)	Very Competent	Competent	Limited Competence	Not Competent Yet
Ability to carry out the task *Did the student* - write a recount with minimal support *Structure and organisation:* - provide an orientation, establishing *who* was involved, *where* and *when* the events happened - provide a sequence of events in chronological order - use paragraphs - provide a re-orientation and/or personal comment (optional) *Language features* - focus on individual participants e.g. the San Francisco earthquake, Marie Curie - focus on past tense e.g. simple past - use a range of action verbs e.g. erupted, discovered, worked - use a range of temporal and other connectives, e.g. first, then, finally, because, however, although, as well - use pronoun reference, e.g. it, she, this - use specific vocabulary appropriate to the information being recounted *Accuracy:* - use grammar accurately e.g. word order, verb endings, pronouns (*she, her, hers, they, their* etc. - spell and use punctuation accurately				
General comments				
Global rating (circle)	Lowest 1 2 3 4 5 Highest			

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Discussion

Thus far, I have described some of the advantages of adopting a functional model of language for assessing students' writing. I have illustrated the approach with reference to a large scale evaluation project, and also with reference to the development of some innovative diagnostic instruments for assessing students writing in key areas of the curriculum. However, I would not like to convey the impression that the approach is unproblematic, and in this section, I would like to deal with two particular problem areas.

The first of these relates to how one might compare assessment procedures based on a functional view of language with more conventional procedures. This is the problem which my colleagues and I encountered in our evaluation of the disadvantaged writing project. On one hand we wanted to adopt evaluative procedures which were fair to the innovation being evaluated. On the other hand, we did not want the evaluation process to lay itself open to charges of bias in favour of the functional approach to the teaching of writing. This dilemma relates to what Beretta calls 'program fair evaluation'. In selecting assessment procedures and instruments, the evaluators need to ensure that one of the assessment procedures or programs being investigated is not discriminated against. In his paper, Beretta provides the following examples which fail the test of being program-fair:

> Asher (1972) and Asher, Kusudo and de la Torre (1974) investigated the effect of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method compared with a "regular" program. In the 1972 report, one of the stories used in classroom training in the TPR group is presented as an example; it is entitled "Mr Schmidt goes to the office." Later in the report we are informed that one of the criterion measures used to compare experimental (TPR) and control (regular) groups is a listening test involving a "story entitled 'Mr Schmidt goes to the office'" (p.136). In view of this, it is hardly astonishing that the experimental students dramatically outperformed controls ($p = .0005$). (Beretta 1986:432)

In the case of the Disadvantaged Schools Project, we made the decision to adopt assessment criteria derived from the functional grammar, even though this left us open to the charge of bias. We did so, because one of our terms of reference was to determine the extent to which the innovation had an impact on students' writing. No doubt, had we embraced alternative criteria (such as evidence of 'creativity') the outcome may well have been different.

The second problem related to the so-called product-oriented bias of genre-based pedagogy. Certain proponents of "process" approaches to the development of writing have argued that genre-based pedagogy takes a normative approach to the production of texts, and focuses on the end product, the destination, as it were, rather than the route. (Some proponents of genre-based teaching, of course, have argued that process approaches focus on the route, and ignore the destination).

> Genre theory grounds writing in particular social contexts, and stresses the convention-bound nature of much discourse. Writing, therefore, involves conformity to certain established patterns, and the teacher's role is to induce learners into particular discourse communities and their respective text types. By contrast, the process approach extols individual creativity, individual growth, and self-realisation, and the teacher's role is that of 'facilitator' rather than 'director'. (Bamforth 1993:94)

Bamforth goes on to point out that the process versus product debate represents a false dichotomy, and that certain individuals on either side of the debate have taken up positions that are ideological rather than empirical. He points out, quite rightly in my view, that ultimately "the central issues of freedom and control are not alternatives between which a choice has to be made. They are really interdependent, and effective writing pedagogy will call upon both approaches."

The process product debate has also suffered from confusion between syllabus design and methodology. To my mind, the strength of the genre approach rests on the principles it sets out for the selection of content. This is essentially a syllabus design issue. The process approach, on the other hand, is oriented towards classroom action, and its concerns are therefore essentially methodological. Any comprehensive approach to pedagogy must incorporate syllabus design, methodology, and assessment.

In this section, I have looked at two criticisms which have been made of the functionally-based genre approach to pedagogy. The first of these is in identifying methods of evaluating genre-based curricular innovations against what, for want of a better term, we might call 'traditional' methods of teaching and assessing written language. This first criticism is in the nature of a 'straw person' argument, in that it can be applied to any approach to pedagogy, when the purpose of the assessment is to evaluate whether or not the principles underlying the innovation are actually reflected in the written (or oral) production of the students. The second criticism relates to the product oriented bias of the adoption of a genre approach. Once again, I find the argument fundamentally flawed for the following reasons. In the first place, the argument that product oriented approaches somehow stifle the creativity of the writer overlooks the fact that creativity has to be measured against something, and that something is generally taken to be a set of conventions or 'rules'. In any field in which 'creativity' is given a look-in, whether it be painting, creative writing, or the production of academic discourse, the creative artist must, in the first instance, master the conventions of the discourse. In other words, one must master the rules in order to transcend them.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show the potential of adopting a functional approach to linguistic analysis for assessing written texts. I have argued that functional grammarians have, over the last few years, provided language teachers with criteria

for evaluating the extent to which learners have gained control of the grammatical and discoursal features of genres which are highly valued within academic contexts. I have tried to illustrate the potential utility of the approach by describing two innovations from either end of the curriculum continuum. The first is a large scale evaluation project within the primary school sector in Sydney, Australia. The second is a needs assessment and evaluation project carried out in South Australia. While the purpose of the paper has been to advocate the adoption of a functional approach to the assessment of second language proficiency, it has not done so uncritically. I have also discussed two criticisms which have been made of the approach.

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